



The Vicar won't Christen our Baby!

By

A RELIGIOUS OF ST. PETER'S
COMMUNITY, WOKING

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WOKING."

"That was a good cup of tea, Mrs. Jones," said Mrs. Smith, putting her cup down. "I needed it, too. Between Jem and the children, I'm worried to death."

"Why, what's the matter, Lizzie? I always say you ought to be thankful. Jem's a good husband and the children are nice children—a bit uppish, perhaps, but they're all like that now-a-days. What's the trouble?"

"Well," said Mrs. Smith, "Jem says the children aren't to go to Church any more, and Mary and young Ted say 'why shouldn't they? That their dad always made them go when they were little and didn't want to, and now they like it, they've got to give it up, the Scouts and Guides and all. My Elsie has just joined the Brownies, and she's crying her eyes out about it.'"

"But why ever doesn't Jem want them to go?" asked Mrs. Jones. She was older than Mrs. Smith, and a widow, making her living by keeping a general shop in the village.

Mrs. Jones was a motherly sort of woman, and the younger women often came to her little shop to talk things over when there was trouble, and found there kindness, and a practical good sense, which helped them.

"It's because the Vicar says he won't christen our baby," said Mrs. Smith, dolefully.

"Won't christen your baby!" exclaimed Mrs. Jones. "But why ever not? Have another cup of tea, Lizzie."

"Well, I don't mind if I do. It's thirsty work, arguing with your family, and Jem's pretty worked up, I can tell you. He says if the Vicar here don't know his job, he'll take the baby somewhere else to be done."

"But what is the trouble?" asked Mrs. Jones, patiently.

"It's them godfathers and godmothers," answered Mrs. Smith. "We'd got it all fixed up, Jem and I. We thought we'd get Fred Brown and his wife. They're pretty well to do now that they've that motor-car business and they might be good for a decent christening present, and perhaps give the boy a lift-up later on. They're good living people, too, if they don't go to Church. Then Jem thought his young brother Bert could be the other godfather, and that maybe it would steady him a bit."

"What does the Vicar say?" asked Mrs. Jones.

"Jem came home in such a temper I couldn't rightly make it all out. He kept saying he wasn't going to have the Vicar interfering with his family affairs. Who did he think he was? And a lot more like that. But I did get out of him in the end that what the Vicar had said was that Jem and me didn't come to Church, except now and again for a wedding or a funeral, and none of those we wanted for godparents did either, and had Jem looked at the Prayer Book and seen what the godparents had to promise for the kid?"

"Well, of course, Jem hadn't. He said he didn't care about the Prayer Book; he'd registered the baby, and it had got to be christened and vaccin-

ated and that was that; then he said 'Good evening' to the Vicar and walked out."

"There is the Vicar now," said Mrs. Jones, "coming down the street. Why, I believe he's coming here."

"Can't I get out?" said Mrs. Smith. But it was too late; Mrs. Jones was letting the Vicar into the parlour behind the shop.

"Good morning, Lizzie," he said, on seeing her. "I'm glad to meet you. I'm afraid I upset your husband a good bit."

Although they seldom or never came to Church, the Vicar had known Lizzie and Jem Smith for many years, and had always been on friendly terms with them until now.

"Yes, that you have," said Mrs. Smith. "And the children too. Their dad says they're not to go to Church any more, and must give up the Guides and Scouts, and there's no end of a bother about it all. Why ever won't you christen the baby, Vicar?"

"Let's leave the baby for a minute," said the Vicar. "I want to know what you and Jem are going to do with Ted? He's a fine lad, and I suppose he'll be leaving school before long."

"Well, not yet, he's only 14," replied Mrs. Smith. "But when he does, Ted's all for mechanical things. We thought of apprenticing him to Dawson & Sons to learn the motor-car business."

"I quite agree," said the Vicar. "You're sensible people to give Ted such a start."

"But, now, let's get back to the baby. I didn't tell Jem I wouldn't baptize him. What I did say was that he must have godparents who were Church people and Communicants, or I couldn't baptize him."

"I don't see why not," said Mrs. Smith.

"Lend me your Prayer Book for a minute, Mrs. Jones," said the Vicar. "Thank you. Now here's the Baptismal Service. I want you just to see what the godparents have got to promise for the baby . . . Here it is: First, they have to promise for the child that he shall renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, and all the carnal desires of the flesh."

"Whatever does all that mean?" said Mrs. Smith.

"Well," began the Vicar, "renounce means to give up, to have nothing to do with. I say, Lizzie, there's Jem. Do see if you can get him to come in and talk things over. Mrs. Jones won't mind, I know."

Mrs. Smith hurried out and they saw her speak to her husband, who, after a short talk, followed her rather reluctantly into Mrs. Jones' little room.

"You must excuse me," he said to the Vicar, throwing down a bag of tools. "Liz said you wanted to speak to me. But I'd rather have gone home and got cleaned up first."

"That's all right, Jem," said the Vicar, "but I do want to explain about this Baptism business. I see your side, but it's only fair you should hear mine, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," answered Jem, rather sulkily.

"Well, here's a Prayer Book. We were just beginning to talk about it when you came past. I know it's all put in a very difficult language. They talked like that when the Prayer Book was written. You see this bit here, where the priest says to the godparents, 'Dost thou, in the name of this child, 'renounce', and all the rest of it."

"Yes, I see it," said Jem. "But heaven only knows what it means. I don't!"

"Well, it means that the godparents promise for the child that he shall give up wilful sin, and live a decent moral life. Wilful sin, of course, is anything wrong which you do with your eyes open, knowing it to be wrong. 'Sinful lusts of the flesh' means drunkenness and adultery and all sins of the body. 'Pomps and vanities' means caring too much about things that don't last, money, worldly fortune, good looks and so on."

"Well, it's a pretty tall order if the godparents have got to promise that the kid'll never do any of that," said Jem.

"Of course, it doesn't mean that," said the Vicar. "But it does mean that they promise the child shall be on the side of right, on God's side and not on the devil's, and that it's up to them to help him to live a decent life."

"But it doesn't seem fair," broke in Mrs. Smith, "to make promises for a baby that can't even speak."

"If you take great benefits from God, surely it's right to make some return," said the Vicar. "You're not obliged to take them from Him. At Holy Baptism, God takes the child into His own family, the Church, and washes away the stain of the sinful nature he inherits. He becomes, as the Catechism says, 'A member of Christ (that is, a living part of Christ), a child of God, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of God.' At Baptism, each little child is welcomed into the Redeemed Society of the Church, and the Church, through the parents and godparents, takes on the training of the child as a Christian. Is that clear?"

"Yes, I think so," said Mrs. Smith. "You don't get the benefits of a club even unless you undertake

to keep the rules, and if you pay in for benefits for the children, you have to keep the rules for them till they're old enough to join on their own."

"That's all very well, Vicar," broke in Jem Smith, still rather sulkily. "But, after all, why can't his mother and I see that the boy's brought up to be a decent sort of chap."

"So you can, Jem, and I'm sure you will. But there's a bit more in it than that. Look at the Prayer Book again; the next thing is that the godparents have to say that they believe every word of the Creed, stedfastly, that is, they are convinced it's all true. Now, do the godparents you've thought of, believe all this?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Jem. "I shouldn't think so. I never thought about it."

"Well, then, how can they say in the name of the baby that they stedfastly believe it all?"

"Seems hardly the straight thing to do," Mrs. Jones put in. She was sitting quietly in the corner of her little sitting-room, listening with a good deal of interest, for being a convinced Churchwoman and Communicant herself, she quite saw the Vicar's point of view.

"Well, is there any more to it?" said Jem. "May as well have the whole thing while we are about it."

"Yes, there's a whole lot more," said the Vicar. "I'll just read you this bit at the end, and translate it a bit if you don't mind, because it's written in old-fashioned English and isn't too easy to understand unless you're used to it. It's this bit beginning 'Forasmuch,' and the priest, as you see, is speaking to the godparents only, exhorting them, that he is speaking very seriously to them. He reminds them that they have made a solemn vow

that the child shall live a moral and a Christian life."

"What's the difference exactly between a vow and a promise?" said Mrs. Jones. "I do know really, but I'd like you to explain it, if you don't mind."

"Well," said the Vicar, "it's wrong to break a promise from one man to another, isn't it? One doesn't think much of a man who promises to do things and never does them."

"No," said Jem. "That you don't. There's that Wilson; promised faithfully he'd get my chisels sharpened for me by to-day, and when I called in, he'd not even begun on them. He's always like that, too, promises a thing, and then never does it."

"A vow," went on the Vicar, "is a solemn promise made to God which it is sin to break."

"I didn't know godparents let themselves in for such a lot," said Lizzie Smith.

"There's a good deal more. They undertake to teach the child about the vows they have made for him, and, of course, the Creed, and he must understand that before he can believe it, mustn't he?"

"They are to see that he hears sermons. Poor little kid, sooner him than me," said Jem.

But the Vicar only smiled and went on: "They have to see that he learns the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in English, that he is brought up in all ways as a Christian, and finally, that he is brought to the Bishop to be Confirmed as soon as he can say the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in English, and understand the Church Catechism. Now will the godparents you want to have do all these—I might say, can they? Could they tell the

little chap why he should be Confirmed and become a Communicant, when they themselves are not? Or, could you, who, after all, are responsible for bringing the child to be baptized?"

"No," said Jem, slowly. "No, they couldn't, and nor could Liz, nor I."

He was an honest man and he was beginning to see that there was more in this godparent business than he'd ever understood.

"Why do you want your baby baptized?" asked the Vicar.

"Well," replied Jem, "the other three were done, and most people are. It seemed the right thing, and a good many would think it queer if it wasn't done."

"It is the right thing," said the Vicar. "But it isn't the right thing, and most unfair to the child, if its parents are going to bring it to be baptized without any intention of teaching it what being a Christian means. You say yourself that you couldn't do it, and Lizzie couldn't, and it's a pretty poor look-out if the godparents can't either."

"But isn't that the clergy's job?" said Jem, still not quite convinced. "You've got our three pretty keen about it all."

"The clergy have got their part to do, of course," said the Vicar. "But it's the home that tells most. Your Ted is still at school, but he'll be leaving in a year's time, and mixing with all sorts of men at the motor works. Is it likely that he'll keep up his Church when his dad never goes, and probably hardly any of the men at the works? Very soon you'll have Ted and Mary, too, thinking religion is only for children."

"And yet," he went on, speaking rather sadly, "you brought them to be baptized. All these

solemn promises were made for them, and, after all, it's you who are responsible for having done it. You chose their godparents, but I don't think they've done much about it. I asked Ted one day who his godparents were, and he said he didn't know."

"I don't think I remember myself," said Jem. "It was when we were living in Hull. Do you remember, Liz?"

"No," said Lizzie. "A couple of pals of yours, I think, and the Church-cleaner, because we hardly knew anyone there. There was a very old parson, and we came away soon after, and I've never heard anything more of any of them."

"Yes," said the Vicar, almost despairingly. "And that's the way it is, nine cases out of ten. No wonder young people are growing up without religion. You see, you people don't really care whether the children are Christians or not. You have them baptized because it's the usual thing to do, but you take no trouble at all that they should learn their religion. Yet you'll take a great deal of trouble to have Ted taught everything from the beginning about motor mechanics by a man who is a trained and skilled motor mechanic himself. Now, why can't any man with a driving licence teach Ted to drive a car?"

"Well," said Mrs. Smith, "his dad and I want him to learn the whole business from the beginning and be trained as a good motor mechanic. There's more in it than just driving a car. He's got to learn it from someone who really knows his job. You can't do that from any man who knows how to drive a car."

"Well, I see your point," said Jem, beginning to get up and shouldering his tools. "But there

was a fellow talking the other day and he said we didn't want to throw over Christian morals, 'Christian ethics' I think he called them, only we didn't have to believe in religion to do that."

"That's rubbish, I think," said Mrs. Jones. "How long would it last with nothing at the back of it, as you might say? Look at Germany."

"No," said the Vicar. "There's nothing much in that idea, but I wish you and Lizzie had been in Church last Sunday, when we had a service for all the Youth Groups round here; Scouts and Guides and the Youth Clubs and the Junior branch of the Guild. You ought to have heard them sing 'Stand up for Jesus.' They fairly took the roof off. I couldn't help wondering how many of them would stand firm against homes where nobody cared, and workshops where there was scoffing and worse. I do think a lot of them will, but you parents might back them up a bit."

"Well," said Jem, preparing to give way, if a bit reluctantly, "about these godparents. I don't know who to ask, if I don't have the ones we thought of."

"What about Mrs. Jones here?" said Lizzie Smith suddenly. She'd make a first-class god-mother."

"And I'd be pleased to, I'm sure," said Mrs. Jones.

"Then there's Dr. West," said the Vicar. "I've heard you say he's a fine young fellow, that time when he was in and out so often the time your Mary had pneumonia. And how about Bill Coates?"

"Bill's a straight chap," said Jem. "Does he go to Church? I never knew that."

"Rather," said the Vicar. "You try for these two, Jem, and I'll christen the baby next Sunday. I must go off now," and he went off humming to himself,

"Stand up, stand up for Jesus,
The fight will not be long;
One day the noise of battle,
The next the Victor's song."

